

Dear Parents,

In our Freshman and Sophomore classes, Occupational Course of Study American History I & II, we are going to be reading the 2008 novel *Little Brother* by Cory Doctorow. It is a young adult novel written for individuals 13 or older (Grossman, 2008; CBC Books)

Plot:

The novel tells the story of Marcus Yallow, also known as W1st0n, a 17 year-old who is very knowledgeable about computers and technology; he uses his knowledge to avoid security cameras at school and play an alternate reality game around San Francisco. While he and his friends are playing the game, a bridge bombing occurs. He and his friends are falsely accused of taking part and are imprisoned. His friend Darryl becomes missing during this time.

After release, Marcus finds out that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is doing additional surveillance on the citizens, such as tracking transportation passes and monitoring internet activity. Marcus feels he and his fellow citizen's rights are being violated, so he uses his knowledge of The Bill of Rights and Declaration of Independence in a class discussion about people fighting for freedom in history and technology, such as modifying an x-box for a communication system to communicate without being monitored. Along with his girlfriend Ange, Marcus rebels against the DHS because he feels they are limiting San Francisco citizen's freedom and also to locate his friend, Darryl, whom he feels is still imprisoned.

Rationale and Educational Experiences:

We will be reading this book to study the *Bill of Rights*, *Declaration of Independence*, and the history of individuals who fought for women's rights, civil rights, and the events during the Vietnam War. The goal of reading this book is to see how all these documents and 20th century events have shaped and affect our lives in the 21st century. It is aligned with our North Carolina State Standards for American History (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction)

AH1.H.1.3 *Use Historical Analysis and Interpretation to: Evaluate the influence of the past on contemporary issues.*

AH2.H.7.3 *Explain the impact of wars on American society and culture since Reconstruction (e.g., relocation of Japanese Americans, American propaganda, first and second Red Scare movement, McCarthyism, baby boom, Civil Rights Movement, protest movements, ethnic, patriotism, etc.).*

I selected this book because the author addresses the *Bill of Rights* and *Declaration of Independence* in a modern context. Through it, we will be learning about historical events, roles of government organizations and as well as the *Patriot Act*. The book is told from the perspective of a student their age and is on a reading level that will be understandable. The book promotes critical thinking about the balance of personal freedom and safety of citizens. I wanted to use this book, so we could include reading, speaking, and writing activities in the classroom and show how history and civics can be connected to English. In 9-10 grade English how write arguments is a common core literacy goal. (Common Core State Standards Initiative).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence

Through this novel, students will learn to form their own arguments. This will help them develop critical thinking skills. They will be able to examine their own values and question whether or not they agree with Marcus and his ideologies and actions.

Some potential classroom activities include:

- **Class Discussions**

- **Socratic seminars where students can create and ask other students open-ended questions to discuss**

- **character to-do lists,**

- **vocabulary activities**

- **read-alouds**

- **research relating to historic events,**

- **graphic organizers,**

alternate ending stories,

- **argumentative essays**

- **writing journals.**

Neil Gaiman, renown British author of *Coraline*, *The Graveyard Book*, and *American Gods* has recommended *Little Brother* for a teenage audience. Here are some excerpts from his review, but I will attach the full review.

Little Brother is mostly brilliant. It's a political polemic, a tract on privacy and information, on hacking and cracking and politics. It's set in a near-future America in which a bomb has gone off, and it's about a 17 year old kid called Marcus versus a Department of Homeland Security that's out of control. And Marcus is actually, believably, wonderfully, in there with a chance.

It's about honesty, not-running away, and about smart vs stupid. There were moments in the book where I wanted to cheer, moments I felt were dead on, moments that made me feel really old.

It's not perfect. Cory's baddies are too bad, in some ways. There's a kid called Charles, who is an evil sneak, reprehensible in every way, who also holds political views that are at odds with our hero's, making us cheer Marcus when he starts to quoting from the Constitution defeat evil Charles.

But I'd recommend Little Brother over pretty much any book I've read this year, and I'd want to get it into the hands of as many smart 13 year olds, male and female, as I can.

Because I think it'll change lives. Because some kids, maybe just a few, won't be the same after they've read it. Maybe they'll change politically, maybe technologically. Maybe it'll just be the first book they loved or that spoke to their inner geek. Maybe they'll want to argue about it and disagree with it. Maybe

they'll want to open their computer and see what's in there. I don't know. It made me want to be 13 again right now and reading it for the first time, and then go out and make the world better or stranger or odder. It's a wonderful, important book, in a way that renders its flaws pretty much meaningless. (Gaiman, 2007).

There is some controversy regarding this book that I want to bring to your attention before we study it. The book has not been banned at any point in time, but in 2014 a principal in Florida removed the book from a summer reading list. Some concerns raised were that it promoted computer hacking culture, that the main characters question authority, it has violence and a sexual scene. Another issue raised by the principal was that the author, who is Canadian, was an “outsider to the George W Bush administration”. (Secola, 2014) The novel takes place during and after a terrorist attack, which due to recent terrorist events in Europe may cause some concern or questions from students.

The author has made *Little Brother* available to the public. His explanation of his reasons for making it available and the text can be found at http://craphound.com/littlebrother/Cory_Doctorow_-_Little_Brother.pdf I am including this information, so you can read or preview the book before making your decision, if you so choose.

If you would not like your child to read this book, here are some other books that you can choose from for your child to read:

1984 by George Orwell: a classic literature text commonly used in the Wake County, which also explores personal freedom in a futuristic society. The main character Winston, who works for a controlling government, known only as Big Brother, rebels by writing a diary and being in a relationship with Julie, both of which are against the law in Oceania

Homeland Security Versus Constitutional Rights by Ted Gottfried: a young adult book which details the events of September 11th and action by Homeland Security. Like *Little Brother*, it explores Constitutional rights and safety but through actual events

A Kids' Guide to America's Bill of Rights by Kathleen Krull: a non-fiction book, which explains the Bill of Rights and its goals. It also discusses controversy with the Bill of Rights and how they are applicable today. It contains anecdotes and case studies on the first 10 amendments

Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories by Ellen Levine: This collection tells actual events in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s from children and young adults who experienced them. This is one of the historical events referenced by Marcus's teacher in *Little Brother* about people fighting for their rights which we would be discussing in history class.

Fallen Angels by Walter Dean Myers: a young adult novel which follows a Perry, a soldier from Harlem, during his service in the Vietnam War (an event also discussed in Marcus's class) as he comes to understand his feelings about war, friendship, and his own values.

I will provide alternate assignments if you choose not to have your child read *Little Brother*. If you have any other suggestions besides those listed above please feel free to share them with me.

_____ I do give permission for my child to read Little Brother and participate in classroom activities

_____ I do not give permission for my child to read Little Brother and would prefer him or her to read an alternate book

_____ I want to discuss the text more before making a decision

Please contact me at **email** and **phone number** with any questions or concerns.

Thank you

Robyn Delaco

OCS teacher

BOOK CITATION

Doctorow, C. (2008) *Little Brother*. New York, New York: Tom Doherty Associates LLC.

ALTERNATE BOOK CHOICES

Orwell, G. (1950). *1984*. New York, New York: Signet Classic.

Gottfried, T. (2003). *Homeland Security Versus Constitutional Rights*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Twenty-First Century Books.

Krull, K. (1999). *Kid's Guide to America's Bill of Rights*. New York, New York: Harper Collins.

Levine, E. (2000). *Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories*. London, England: Puffin Books

Meyers, W. D. (1988) *Fallen Angels*. New York, New York: Scholastic Publications

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Secola, J. (2014, June 9) Principal: 'Little Brother' questions authority. *Pensecola News Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.pnj.com/story/news/2014/06/09/complaint-file-book-censorship/10262161/>

CHANGING PLANES.

POSTED BY [NEIL GAIMAN](#) AT [12:55 PM](#)

I wrote this on the plane (it's what happens when you finish a book and you haven't got anyone to talk to about it). And I have wifi until they throw me out of this airport lounge:

Just finished Cory Doctorow's book *Little Brother*.

I've liked Cory's fiction as long as I've been reading it -- gave him a blurb for his short story collection -- but this made me happy in ways only Cory's non-fiction had made me happy before.

This is because Cory is one of the Explainers. The people who see what's going on, or what they perceive to be going on, and then turn around and tell everyone else, and once you've heard it their way you can't ever see it the old way again.

Douglas Adams was one. Bruce Sterling does it sometimes, and so does Bill Gibson. They all do/did it more in conversation and in non-fiction than in fiction though. Malcolm Gladwell can do it in non-fiction (I've never met him and don't know if he does it in conversation, which is the best way of getting it from Cory or Bruce or Bill). (A favourite recent moment was watching Cory explain to Rob Brydon why YouTube is a dandelion.)

Little Brother is a YA novel, and it reminds me of nothing so much as a Heinlein juvenile (this is a good thing. Heinlein's books for younger readers were mostly terrific, something I mention here because I run into people who either haven't read Heinlein or have only read some of the messier later adult novels, or who disagree with Heinlein politically with or without reading his books,

who have no idea how good the juveniles are).

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It's not perfect. Cory's baddies are too bad, in some ways. There's a kid called Charles, who is an evil sneak, reprehensible in every way, who also holds political views that are at odds with our hero's, making us cheer Marcus when he starts quoting from the Constitution to defeat evil Charles...and Charles felt like a wet straw man. When things get ideological, I wanted Marcus to have at least one decent argument with someone who disagreed with him but at least seemed to have a point of view. There's a scene where we see a Karl Rove figure telling cronies not to travel before the mid-terms, implying that maybe the Americans are bombing themselves for political advantage... each time something like this happened I felt like Cory was selling himself and the book short, in a way he doesn't when he explains the statistical danger of false positives (something I'd just been reading about in Derren Brown's *Tricks of the Mind*, oddly enough, although that's only *oddly enough* if you're either Cory or Derren). It feels like a stronger book whenever Cory gives the impression that the bad guys think -- know -- that they're in the right, that the Bill of Rights and the Constitution are disposable when you come

up against Evil Forces Bent on the Destruction Of America. Because you can treat as many people as badly as you need to if you're in the right. Too often, the baddies are bad and the goodies are good. And if I'm going to nitpick there are a couple of plot things that hiccup...

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